

STATINTL

# Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers

Hannah Arendt

"The picture of the world's greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring a thousand non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one."

—Robert S. McNamara

## I

The Pentagon Papers, like so much else in history, tell different stories, teach different lessons to different readers. Some claim they have only now understood that Vietnam was the "logical" outcome of the cold war or the anticommunist ideology, others that this is a unique opportunity to learn about decision making processes in government. But most readers have by now agreed that the basic issue raised by the Papers is deception. At any rate, it is obvious that this issue was uppermost in the minds of those who compiled the Pentagon Papers for *The New York Times*, and it is at least probable that this was also an issue for the team of writers who prepared the forty-seven volumes of the original study.

The famous credibility gap, which has been with us for six long years, has suddenly opened up into an abyss. The quicksand of lying statements of all sorts, deceptions as well as self-deceptions, is apt to engulf any reader who wishes to probe this material, which, unhappily, he must recognize as the infrastructure of nearly a decade of United States foreign and domestic policy.

Because of the extravagant lengths to which the commitment to non-truthfulness in politics went on the highest level of government, and because of the concomitant extent to which lying was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all governmental services, military and civilian—the phony body counts of the "search-and-destroy" missions, the doctored and

air force, the "progress" reports to Washington from the field written by subordinates who knew that their performance would be evaluated by their own reports<sup>2</sup>—one is easily tempted to forget the background of past history, itself not exactly a story of immaculate virtue, against which this newest episode must be seen and judged.

For secrecy—what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government—and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. Whoever reflects on these matters can only be surprised how little attention has been paid, in our tradition of philosophical and political thought, to their significance, on the one hand, for the nature of action and, on the other, for the nature of our ability to deny in thought and word whatever happens to be the actual fact. This active, aggressive capability of ours is clearly different from our passive susceptibility to falling prey to error, illusion, the distortions of memory, and to whatever else can be blamed on the failings of our sensual and mental apparatus.

A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new, but this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start *ab ovo*, to create *ex nihilo*. In order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed. Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we are physically located and imagine that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the ability to lie, the deliberate denial of factual truth, and the capacity to

change facts, the ability to act, are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source, imagination.

For it is by no means a matter of course that we can say, "The sun shines, when it is actually raining (the consequence of certain brain injuries is the loss of this capacity); it rather indicates that while we are well equipped for the world, sensually as well as mentally, we are not fitted to it as one of its inalienable parts. We are free to change the world and to start something new in it. Without the mental freedom to deny or affirm existence, to say "yes" or "no"—not just to statements or propositions in order to express agreement or disagreement, but to things as they are given, beyond agreement or disagreement, to our organs of perception and cognition—no action would be possible; and action is of course the very stuff politics is made of.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, when we talk about lying, and especially about lying among acting men, let us remember that the lie did not creep into politics by some accident of human sinfulness; moral outrage, for this reason alone, is not likely to make it disappear. The deliberate falsehood deals with contingent facts, that is with matters which carry no inherent truth within themselves, no necessity to be as they are; factual truths are never compellingly true. The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily lives; it is always in danger of being perforated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups, nations, or classes, or denied and distorted, often carefully covered up by reams of falsehoods or simply allowed to fall into oblivion. Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs. From this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt—as secure and